

Name: _____

Monster of the Desert

by Guy Belleranti

Imagine a monster with a big head, a powerful bite, strong digging claws, and a forked tongue. The monster is black with yellow or pink scales all over its body. If you've been to the deserts of southwestern U.S. and northwestern Mexico, you may have seen such an animal, known as the Gila (HEE-la) monster. Growing up to two feet long, it is the largest of all lizards native to the United States.



The Gila monster is one of only two venomous lizards living in North America. The other is the similar looking Mexican beaded lizard. Named after Arizona's Gila River, the colorful Gila monster makes its home in hot, dry, rocky desert landscapes.

Despite its scary name the Gila monster is actually a shy animal. It doesn't bravely leap out at people, spitting venom. Instead, the solitary Gila monster spends most of its time in underground burrows or hiding under rocks.

A Gila monster can go for months without eating. How can it do this? Well, it lives on the fat it has stored in its tail and abdomen.

The most likely time to see this animal is in the spring when it comes out to hunt for food. While it is nocturnal (coming out at night) for most of the year, the Gila monster does occasionally venture out in the sunshine during the spring months to sun itself on desert rocks.

The Gila monster doesn't consider people food. We're way too big. However, the lizard will bite people if it is feeling threatened. While not deadly, its jaws are powerful and its bite can be extremely painful to humans. So if you ever see a Gila monster, leave it alone and tell an adult.

So what does a Gila monster consider food? Birds and their eggs are two of a Gila monster's favorite foods. They also hunt small mammals, frogs, lizards, insects and centipedes.



Just like a snake, the Gila monster flicks its forked tongue to pick up and follow the scent of its prey. It's not a fast-moving lizard; it moves slowly and quietly so it can sneak up on

unsuspecting prey. Then it bites quickly. Its venom doesn't come out of fangs like in venomous snakes. Instead, it flows out of glands in the lizard's lower jaw and into the victim's wound. The venom is useful in killing larger prey, but the Gila monster usually just swallows small animals whole. The venom is also useful for defense against predators.

The Gila monster is a legally protected animal, the first venomous animal in North America to be so honored. Still, their numbers continue to grow smaller due to habitat loss and to illegal collection for the pet trade.

About the Author

Guy Belleranti works as a docent at Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes from his experiences working with snakes and teaching others.

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1. Where and when would you mostly likely see a Gila monster in the wild?
- a. in Arizona on a cool winter afternoon
 - b. in Northern Florida on a hot summer afternoon
 - c. in Oregon, on a warm spring night
 - d. in Southern Nevada, on a warm spring afternoon

2. According to the article, what do the Gila monster and the Mexican beaded lizard have in common?

3. According to the article, how does a Gila monster's tongue help it find food?

4. Circle the words that describe a Gila monster. Cross out the words that do not.

speedy	shy	poisonous	herbivore	colorful
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5. A full-grown Gila monster is about as long as a...
- a. hot dog
 - b. skateboard
 - c. bus
 - d. fork

Name: _____

Reptile With Horns

by Guy Belleranti



Match each vocabulary word from the article with the correct definition.

_____ 1. powerful

a. smell

_____ 2. venomous

b. against the law

_____ 3. unsuspecting

c. put in danger

_____ 4. leap

d. poisonous

_____ 5. occasionally

e. not aware of danger

_____ 6. threatened

f. jump

_____ 7. scent

g. strong

_____ 8. illegal

h. sometimes; not often

◆ Now try this: On a sheet of lined paper, use each vocabulary word from above in a sentence.

ANSWER KEY

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They are the only two venomous lizards living in North America.

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ANSWER KEY

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